

May 17, 2005

The Honorable Duncan Hunter, Chairman
Armed Services Committee
2120 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for your leadership on the House Armed Services Committee. As you continue work on the fiscal year 2006 Defense Authorization bill, we urge the Committee to include the following priorities: ending the Disabled Veteran's Tax and the Military Families Tax, ensuring an adequate number of troops and adequate equipment for our troops, improving military pay for senior enlisted personnel, expanding TRICARE to all members of the Guard and Reserve, and ensuring fair and equitable recruitment incentives and bonuses for the Guard and Reserve.

As you know, the Disabled Veterans' Tax forces disabled military retirees to give up one dollar of their pension for every dollar of disability pay they receive. Two years ago a partial solution to this unfair tax was enacted, but it takes ten years to eliminate the tax while requiring two-thirds of military retirees with service-connected disabilities to continue to pay it. We support ending this unfair tax for all of the nearly 400,000 military retirees who continue to pay it.

Another unfair tax that must end is the Military Families Tax (SBP/DIC offset) which penalizes survivors, mostly widows of those killed as a result of combat or from injuries sustained in service. These widows lose their survivor benefits if they receive Dependency and Indemnity Compensation benefits because their spouse has died of a service-connected injury. We must end the Military Families Tax for the 53,000 spouses who continue to pay this unfair tax, which affects families that have made the greatest sacrifice for our country.

We also support strengthening our support for our men and women in uniform. Unfortunately, our troops are stretched too thin and are not adequately equipped. Currently, nearly 300,000 U.S. service men and women are deployed, with one-half in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Nearly 70,000 have been called up more than once. Chronic shortages in personal protective gear and armored vehicles have made our troops less secure. Last year, there was an increase in the number of troops for the Army and Marines, and supplemental funds for force protection measures, such as additional body armor and armored Humvees. We support building on the success in increasing troop strength and getting better equipment for those called to duty. Raising end-strength would reduce the strain on the National Guard and Reserve and improve recruitment and retention by reducing extended deployments.

Key to military retention and improved readiness is the restoration of targeted pay raises for mid-grade to senior Non-Commissioned Officers that began in FY 2003, which the Bush Administration dropped from the fiscal year 2005 budget. These pay raises are needed to retain the critical, senior enlisted personnel (sergeants in senior grades) who are most involved in the fighting.

We must also do more to improve benefits for our National Guard and Reservists. Despite the fact that more than 340,000 members of the National Guard and Reserves have been called up for active duty over the last two and one-half years, not all members have full access to TRICARE. According to the Government Accountability Office, 20 percent of all reservists do not have health insurance, and 40 percent of reservists aged 19 to 35 lack health coverage. Last year, Congress gave National Guard and Reserve personnel and their families permanent TRICARE 120 days after being deactivated. We also succeeded in providing one year of TRICARE benefits for every 90 days of service, after being called up, for personnel who agree to serve in the selected reserve and pay a low fee. We must build on this success and provide full access to TRICARE to all members of the Guard and Reserve and their families for a low fee.

We must also ensure that recruitment and retention incentives and bonuses for Reserve components are fair, and equitable in comparison with incentives and bonuses for active duty components. We support raising the enlistment bonus cap by \$30,000 to attract new recruits to the reserves, offering a \$2,500 referral bonus to current reserve members who refer a qualified prospect for the reserves, and removing current limits on consecutive bonuses, and offering two to six year enlistment options with appropriate bonuses.

Our men and women in uniform both past and present have served our nation with distinction, and now it is time for a grateful nation to honor that service. Thank you for your consideration of these requests. We look forward to working with you to ensure that our troops and our veterans receive the benefits they have earned and that they deserve.

Sincerely,

Darlene Hooley
Member of Congress

Nancy Pelosi
Democratic Leader

Steny Hoyer
Democratic Whip

Robert Menendez
Democratic Caucus Chairman

Jim Clyburn
Democratic Caucus Vice-Chairman

Lane Evans
Member of Congress